

JAN 21, 1995

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★★★★ San Francisco Chronicle A19

## OBITUARIES



BY THE CHRONICLE/1987

**'IRON MAN' WALT STACK**  
He ran 17 miles, then took a dip

## Walt Stack — Workouts Were S.F. Legend

Marathon runner and swimmer Walt Stack, whose daily 17-mile jog across the Golden Gate Bridge and swim in San Francisco Bay were familiar, inspiring sights on the waterfront, died Thursday in a San Francisco nursing home after a long illness. He was 87.

For years, his daily ritual never varied — up before sunrise, a bike ride from Potrero Hill to the Dolphin Club at Fisherman's Wharf, a bare-chested jog to Sausalito and back followed by a one-mile bay swim. In between, he waved at countless well-wishers and told endless jokes and stories, most of them unprintable.

Known as the "Iron Man," Mr. Stack was dedicated to his regimen, but never took it too seriously. He trained on hot dogs and often crossed the finish line while holding a can of beer.

"All this work I'm doin', it don't mean s—," he would say in the midst of his workout, to anyone who would listen. "I'm going to croak, just like the rest of you."

After a quick sauna, he took a deep swig of Kentucky bourbon and set off to his job as a hod carrier, a less demanding pursuit. He toted 100-pound bags of cement up

and down ladders at construction sites.

He was a member of the Dolphin Club at Fisherman's Wharf since 1965 and served as its president and a member of its board of governors.

"He was a tough old goat," said longtime club caretaker Lou Marcelli. "Rain, wind, fog, cold — nothing stopped him. He never took a break. Never."

Mr. Stack, who jogged with his shirt off so the world could admire the tattoos of peacocks, horse heads and swimming ladies that covered his chest and arms, estimated that he ran 4,000 miles and participated in 14 marathon races every year. He ran the Bay to Breakers race every year from 1966 until failing health forced him to cut down a few years ago.

He began running at the age of 57, after years as a ship's fireman, a butcher, a construction worker and a union organizer. He served as a vice president of the Marine Firemen's Union, a major element of the 1930s waterfront labor movement.

"You can be a real Bircher, and I can be a Communist and I can still love you, because I figure you're a runner," he once said. "You're a good Joe and you'll feel the same way about me. You'll say, 'Geez, he's a dirty Red, but he's Walt Stack. He's a runner. He's my buddy.'"

In 1966, he founded the Dolphin South End Runners Club. Its symbol is a turtle and its motto is, "Start off slow and taper off." He also founded the Double Dipsea Race, a 13½-mile annual scramble on Mount Tamalpais.

In 1978, he completed the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run through the Sierra Nevada in just under 38 hours, becoming the oldest man ever to finish.

In a 1981 memoir, he recalled how his fame once preceded him to Boston:

"I was in town for the marathon and I was taking a p — in a field before the race started, and some guy came up to me and asked for an autograph right while I was doing that. My name gets around like dogs —. It's all over the place."

Surviving are a daughter, Mary Starvus, and a brother, Joe, of New York. Plans for a memorial celebration and swim at the Dolphin Club are incomplete. The Dolphin

Club and the National Park Service will sponsor a Walt Stack Trail Run on April 9 that will trace the steps of his daily run to and from Sausalito.

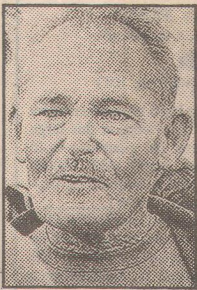
— Steve Rubenstein

# Jogging guru Walter Stack dies at 87

By Larry D. Hatfield  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Walter Stack, the octogenarian who literally ran circles around runners decades younger than he and one of San Francisco's most endearing and enduring characters, died Thursday at 87.

Mr. Stack, who was known as the joggers' guru, among other fond sobriquets, had been in failing health for some time.



**Walter Stack**

He was known at least by sight to countless Golden Gate Bridge motorists who saw him — shirtless and leathery tanned, come rain, shine or gale — running across the bridge and back, something he did every morning well into his 80s.

Though he did not start running until his 60s, Mr. Stack, an ordained minister, former seaman and veteran union hod carrier, kept at it until his health stopped him about two years ago.

For many years, Mr. Stack had a daily regime of bicycling from his Potrero Hill home to the Dolphin Club at the foot of Hyde Street, running to Sausalito and back, a distance of some 17 miles, then taking an hour's swim in the cold waters of San Francisco Bay.

## 'Big ego gratification'

"Running and being fit is a big ego gratification for me," Mr. Stack once said. "It gives me self-confidence."

As recently as six months ago, he still would do a regular walk, said Ken Reed, a fellow runner and member of the famed Dolphin South End Runners Club, the largest running club west of the Mississippi. Mr. Stack founded the club in 1967.

Mr. Stack had been president emeritus of the 400-member running club for the past several years, and attended a club race only three weeks ago, Reed said.

Mr. Stack ran in as many as 200 marathons, more than a dozen 50-mile races and even a few 100-mile

races on several continents and in most of the states.

But Reed said when he once sought advice from him on the proper diet for runners, Mr. Stack said, "Well, I have a hot dog for breakfast."

"He'd also take a six-pack of beer on marathons," Reed said. "He's up there in heaven, drinking, partying and looking for women. Nobody should feel sorry for him."

Mr. Stack was on the Mayor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports for many years. His sagest advice on fitness: "Just keep on breathing."

## Encouraged women runners

Reed credited Mr. Stack with encouraging women runners, noting that the Dolphin Club developed several world-class women runners.

"He did a lot for running," Reed said. "He was cantankerous and he was a funny character, but he did a lot for women runners and kids' running."

Mr. Stack also founded the Practice Bay to Breakers, a run that followed the course of the famed Bay to Breakers a week before the world's largest footrace each year.

Mr. Stack is survived by a daughter and brother.

No funeral is planned, but Reed said the club would have a memorial for him.

The Dolphin Club and National Park Service also will sponsor an April 9 Walt Stack Trail Run that will generally follow the route of his daily trek from The City to Marin County and back.

# Walt Stack, Bay Area's colorful fitness guru, dies at age 86

Ran bare-chested across bridge daily

By KARYN HUNT

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Walt Stack, one of the early and best-known apostles of the fitness movement, has died. He was 86.

Stack was a familiar figure to Bay Area residents, who saw him shuffling bare-chested across the Golden Gate Bridge every morning or swimming in the bay below in his bright red cap, part of a grueling exercise regimen that was the stuff of local legend.

Stack died of natural causes Wednesday at a board-and-care home, family members said.

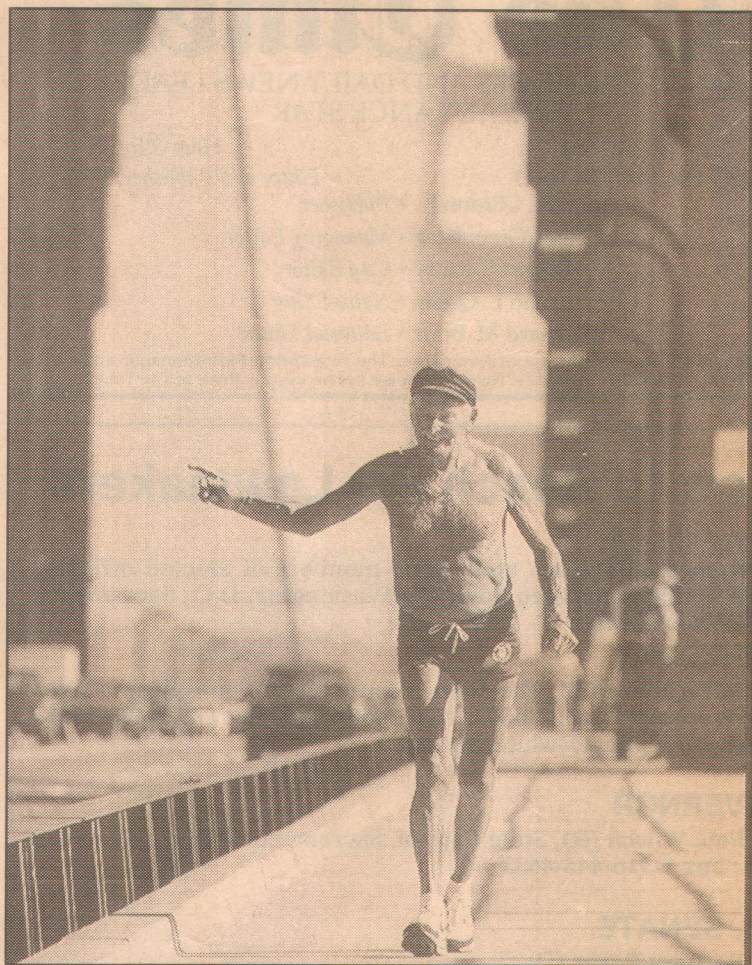
Stack began bay swimming in the late 1960s at age 58, then took up running after reading several articles touting its health benefits. His daily routine eventually included a 6-mile bike ride from home to the bridge, where he stripped to his shorts and ran 17 miles across the bridge and back. Then he jumped into the bay for a half-hour swim.

By the age of 80, Stack figured he had put in 62,000 miles — 2½ times around the earth and enough to wear out 35 pairs of running shoes per year.

During his lifetime, he ran in nearly 200 marathons; 15 50-mile events and three 100-mile runs, including the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon after the age of 70.

"I think everybody had gone home by the time he was done," his daughter, Mary Starvus Stack said Friday.

"He finished by grit and stamina. He just did it. He wouldn't stop and think about was it smart. He would just



Associated Press

Walt Stack on his daily bridge run in June 1988.

keep going until it was behind him, which is why I think a lot of people were inspired by him. He didn't know a lot about style," she said.

Stack often joked that he was the only Alcatraz prisoner ever to swim from the island prison to the shores of San Francisco and live to tell about it. He served time there briefly as a youngster for going AWOL from military service.

He also appeared on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson in the early 1980s, where he was "bleeped" repeatedly because of his foul mouth, longtime friend Walt Schneeblis said. He has been

included in two books, "Over The Hill" and "Growing Old Is Not For Sissies."

Stack also was influential in convincing women to join in the running boom and helped them gain entrance to athletic clubs, friends said.

A lifelong communist, Stack also was active in labor issues. At various times in his life, he was a seaman, an ordained minister and a unionized hod carrier.

In the years before he died, Stack suffered several small strokes, his niece, Jackie Stack said.

Stack's wife, Marcella, died in 1991.